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## **VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH PROMOTES AWARENESS OF VIRAL HEPATITIS RISK FACTORS**

*May is National Hepatitis Awareness Month*

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Viral hepatitis can cause severe signs and symptoms, chronic illness and even death, but prevention and early detection can help avoid long-term complications. During National Hepatitis Awareness Month, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) urges Virginians to learn about the risks, prevention and treatment methods of viral hepatitis. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were an estimated 164,000 new hepatitis A, B and C infections in the United States in 2003. Collectively, they result in approximately 15,000 deaths in the United States each year.

Viral hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of six recognized hepatitis viruses, the most common of which are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Once the virus enters the body it attacks the liver, which performs many functions essential to life. The liver's functions include detoxification, making proteins that fight infection, storing minerals and vitamins used for energy, and metabolizing fat, protein and various substances and medicines into a form the body can use.

"Many people with viral hepatitis may be unaware of their infection because they have no signs or symptoms," said Casey W. Riley, director of VDH's Division of Disease Prevention. "Testing is extremely important and can help prevent and control infections. Fortunately, hepatitis A and B are vaccine-preventable diseases. Anyone who may be at risk should know his or her vaccination history and get tested."

Signs and symptoms of all forms of acute (new) and chronic (lifelong) viral hepatitis are similar and may include jaundice, fatigue, dark urine, abdominal pain, loss of appetite or nausea.

Hepatitis A is found in the feces (stool) of infected people and spread by close contact with an infected person or through contaminated food or beverage. There is no chronic state of hepatitis A, but symptoms can last up to six months. Good personal hygiene and proper sanitation can help prevent hepatitis A infection. The best protection against infection is the hepatitis A vaccine. Hepatitis A can infect anyone, but high-risk groups include travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis A, children in areas with high rates of hepatitis A, men who have sex with men, injection drug users and those with chronic liver disease. Once someone has been infected by hepatitis A that person is immune for life to re-infection.

Hepatitis B is found primarily in the blood and sex fluids of infected people and, to a lesser extent, other body fluids. The best protection against infection is the hepatitis B vaccine. Using latex condoms during sex, getting a hepatitis B blood test if you are pregnant, and not using injection drugs may also help prevent hepatitis B. People who develop chronic hepatitis B infection are at greater risk of cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver cancer. However, once someone has been infected and recovered from a hepatitis B infection, that person is immune for life to re-infection.

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Hepatitis C is found in the blood of infected people. It is spread through contact with infected blood and other body fluids, primarily by sharing needles used for injection drug use. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. Avoiding contact with blood is the best protection against hepatitis C. About 80 percent of hepatitis C infections become chronic and can lead to long-term health effects such as cirrhosis or liver cancer. However, leading a healthy lifestyle and getting proper treatment may help avoid serious complications.

Anyone interested in viral hepatitis testing or vaccination should contact their physician. For more information on viral hepatitis, testing and vaccine options, contact the Division of Disease Prevention's Hotline at (800) 533-4148 or visit [www.vdh.virginia.gov/std](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/std).

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